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TAGS: ENRG TRGY PARM MNUC BO  
SUBJECT: BELARUS GEARING UP FOR NUCLEAR POWER PLANT

REF: A. 05 MINSK 337

¶B. MINSK 640

Classified By: Charge Jonathan Moore for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) The GOB continues to advocate the construction of a nuclear power plant (NPP) in Belarus. Although a decision has not officially been made, the state media's positive propaganda indicates that Lukashenko plans to build an NPP whether Belarusians agree or not. GOB officials maintain the NPP would use the "latest technology"; press statements and history strongly indicate that the NPP will likely be built by Russians and Belarusians with locally produced (and Russian) materials. Such plans do not set well with the population, which continues to suffer from the consequences of Chernobyl that the government has failed to fully address.  
End summary.

¶2. (U) Authorities are continuing with plans to build a 2,000-megawatt water-cooled NPP in 2008-2015 (ref A). Construction would take place in the Shklov or Krasnopolye regions in the Mogilev Oblast and cost approximately USD 2.2-2.6 billion. Although planners stress that the GOB will not make a final decision on an NPP without holding a public discussion, independent newspaper Komsomolskaya Pravda (KP) on August 24 reported that the initial stages of preparation had already begun at the Krasnopolye site, 100 kilometers from the Russian border.

"Nuclear Power Only Alternative"

¶3. (U) Using state media as their mouthpiece, the authorities and their scientists publicly support nuclear power as the "only alternative" if Belarus truly wants to be less dependent on foreign (Russian) energy. Advocates predict an NPP would produce cheap energy (USD 0.16 per kilowatt hour), save Belarus USD 300-400 million per year in energy purchases, and account for 27-30 percent of Belarus' energy usage by 2020. Currently, Belarus imports 85 percent of its energy, costing Belarus USD 2 billion per year, and Russia supplies 95 percent of energy imports. NPP advocates from the GOB ministries, Belarusian National Academy of Sciences, and nuclear research institute Sosny claim an NPP would overcome an energy deficit otherwise expected to appear in ¶2010. Officials publicly promote an NPP as "ecologically

"safer" and cheaper to operate than other energy resources, and Lukashenko on August 3 considered an NPP the most important factor in protecting Belarus' energy security.

"An NPP Is Completely Safe"

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**¶4.** (U) Lukashenko on August 1 shrugged off NPP fears among the population and stressed that the decision about an NPP must be based on "sober" scientific and economic calculations rather than on "radiation fears" and other phobias. He stated that only state-of-the-art reliable technologies would be used. On August 4, state owned newspaper Sovetskaya Belarus assured its readers that NPP planners were following a well-detailed plan, guidelines set by international organizations such as the International Atomic Energy Agency, and national requirements stricter than those in the United States or Japan.

Who Will Build and Finance An NPP?

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**¶5.** (U) The GOB maintains that only the best and appropriate materials would be used to build an NPP, but public statements and events indicate that Russia will be the preferred source of materials and services. On July 13, Belarus held talks with Russia's Federal Agency for Nuclear Energy (Rosatom) to develop legislative framework to develop and plan an NPP in Belarus, though the MFA denied supplies of NPP equipment were discussed. SB on August 4 opined that cooperation with Russia would be "economically advantageous" for Belarus, possibly leading to Russian financial credit for construction. Although NPP planners claim that the potential construction sites were chosen for their soil quality, SP did not hide the fact that the sites in the Mogilev oblast were chosen for their proximity to the Russian border, enabling Belarus to use Smolensk NPP's infrastructure while developing its own atomic energy program.

Concerns Among Many

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**¶6.** (C) Twenty years after the Chernobyl tragedy, most Belarusians have serious concerns about an NPP in Belarus. A June IISEPS poll noted that 52 percent of those polled were against atomic energy in Belarus. Professor at the National Academy of Sciences and member of the Belarusian intelligentsia Ivan Nikitchenko told Poloff that Belarusian contractors would build the NPP with primarily Russian materials. Nikitchenko suspected the GOB would sacrifice the safety and reliability of Western materials and know-how by purchasing materials and soliciting help from their Russian business friends at inflated prices, making them rich off the project's enormous financing and kickbacks. Nikitchenko fears Russian suppliers will sell poor quality materials or create a "shortage" of materials in order to maximize profits, because according to Nikitchenko, Russians'(and other (Belarusian) business people's) greed outweighs their concerns for a safe NPP in Belarus.

**¶7.** (C) Nikitchenko's second fear is that the impatient Lukashenko will demand the NPP be built in half the time, sacrificing quality and safety in the process. As Nikitchenko noted, construction of an NPP could end up like the structurally unsound National Library (ref B) or the forever under-repair Minsk ring road.

Comment

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**¶8.** (C) Although GOB officials maintain that a decision on an NPP has not been made, the state's aggressive media campaign and the real threats of significantly higher prices for Russian gas suggest Lukashenko has already given the green light. The greatest concern for us is the level of competence that would be observed in the construction of the nuclear plant. Lukashenko has a habit of preferring Belarusian and Russian goods over their higher quality

Western equivalents. He also tends to demand that his massive social-economic projects are completed in half the time technicians deem necessary. The idea of an NPP may be premature for Belarus, a country whose government has yet to fully and sincerely address the social, economic, and health/psychological consequences of the Chernobyl tragedy.

Moore